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VIRGINIA AND THE WEST; AN INTERPRETATION¹

The scientific study of western American history is a child of yesterday, so recently born that when writers make the attempt to give the correct perspective to western happenings they find their effort thwarted by the inadequacy of their knowledge. Exactly what did occur west of the mountains has been so infrequently made the subject of that careful and painstaking investigation which must precede any right interpretation, that the meanings of most occurrences in regions remote from the eastern settlements are still subjects of speculation. An excellent example of this ignorance is found in the most dramatic western event of the eighteenth century: the occupation of the Illinois country by the Virginia troops under George Rogers Clark during the revolutionary war. The story of that enterprise is more or less familiar because it is the central event in a well known historical novel.² It is the dramatic character of a Clark's expedition that has attracted the attention of historians so that what may be called the annals of the western hero's anabasis may be found in most of the histories of this country; but there have been few attempts to place the event in its proper setting and to interpret its significance in the history of the revolution as a whole. Even today historians do little more than guess at the influence which the occupation of the Illinois villages exerted upon the negotiations of the final treaty of peace in 1783.

The account of this episode as usually narrated is based very

¹ This paper was written originally for purposes other than publication in this magazine. The fact that it is based upon several years of study of original sources not all of which have been printed may make it appear worthy of these pages.

For more intimate knowledge of the interpretation here given the reader is referred to the volumes of the British series and the Virginia series in the *Illinois historical collections*. There will soon be published by Arthur H. Clark (Cleveland, Ohio, 1916) a work by the author entitled *The Mississippi valley in British politics: a study of the trade, land speculation, and experiments in imperialism culminating in the American revolution*, which will justify the interpretation here given of the pre-revolutionary situation.

² Winston Churchill, *The crossing* (New York, 1904).

closely upon Clark's own reports and may be epitomized as follows: the British at Detroit were sending Indian war bands against the frontiers of Pennsylvania and Virginia; and the most remote posts of the latter state, situated in modern Kentucky, were especially subject to the ravages of these relentless savages. A young frontiersman, George Rogers Clark, formed a plan for striking a blow at the British in the north and proposed it to Patrick Henry, governor of Virginia, who in the most secret way provided money from the state funds for the enterprise. Keeping his purposes to himself, the young commander collected troops to the number of about two hundred and with these landed near Fort Massac, situated in the southern part of modern Illinois, and marched across the prairies to Kaskaskia, which, taken completely by surprise, surrendered without a blow. Clark was able to hold the whole Illinois country throughout the war; and without doubt, say most historians, the success of this event was the cause of the cession of the west as far as to the Mississippi river in the final treaty of peace.³

This whole narrative is, as a rule, dragged into the general history of the United States as if it were a startling episode unconnected with preceding events and as if it had little relation to the men and measures of the time, its chief importance depending on the later development of the region. Thus, lacking perspective, the composition of the picture as a whole is untrue, in spite of the accuracy of its details.

The occupation of the Illinois country by Virginia has a long history preceding it, but in this time and place it will be possible only to hint at the most important steps in the development which led up to the sending of the frontiersman to the remote regions on the Mississippi. The fact that the charter claims of Virginia stretched northwestward so as to include most of what is the old northwest is too well known to delay us; but this very fact is fundamental in the interpretation of the revolutionary episode; and it must, therefore, be constantly borne in mind, for the whole history of the revolutionary war in the west is a mys-

³ Typical illustrations are: Reuben G. Thwaites, *How George Rogers Clark won the northwest* (Chicago, 1903); Jacob P. Dunn, Jr., *Indiana* (Boston, 1905); William H. English, *Conquest of the country northwest of the river Ohio and life of George Rogers Clark* (Indianapolis, 1896); and Claude H. Van Tyne, *American revolution (American nation series, v. 9 — New York, 1907).*

tery which can be solved only by an understanding of Virginia's persistent attempt to make good her claims to this vast territory.

It was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that the colonists began to realize that great wealth was to be obtained by exploiting the western domain; but from that time onward one scheme of colonization after another was started in the hope of making fortunes for the promoters. It was a company of Virginia gentlemen backed by London capital that made the first definite trial at settlement. The attempt of the Ohio company to establish colonists on the upper waters of the Ohio river was the immediate occasion of the French and Indian war, which ended in the cession to Great Britain of the west as far as the Mississippi. After this event the activities among the colonists, particularly in Virginia and Pennsylvania, in pushing settlements westward became more and more important in the history of the country, and the land fever spread rapidly among the speculators of both the new and the old world. In a letter dated 1768, which discusses the possibilities of investments in America, particularly in western lands, there occurs the statement: "It is almost a proverb in this neighborhood (Philadelphia) that 'Every great fortune made here within these fifty years has been by land.'"⁴ When the famous western pioneer, George Croghan, was in England, he found his associates "land crazy."⁵ Most of the public men of the eastern colonies, such as Washington, Henry, and Franklin, at one time or another entered into some "get-rich-quick" scheme for exploiting and colonizing the west; and the shares of every company for promoting settlement west of the mountains found a ready market.⁶

This speculative interest in western lands was associated with the advance of the fur traders into the wilderness. Previous to the French and Indian war, many British traders were engaged in the fur trade; but after the close of that war there was a wild

⁴ Sir Philip Francis, *The Francis letters* (London [1901]), 1: 81.

⁵ George Croghan to Sir Wm. Johnson, March 30, 1766, in Johnson manuscripts, 12: 127.

⁶ Alvord, *The Mississippi valley in British politics*. Consult index. Clarence E. Carter, *Great Britain and the Illinois country, 1763-1774* (Washington, 1910), ch. 6. See also Washington's *Writings*, edited by W. C. Ford (New York, 1889-1893); Franklin's *Writings*, edited by A. H. Smyth, (New York, 1905-1907); and Alvord and Carter, *Critical period, 1763-1765*, and *New régime, 1765-1767* (*Illinois historical collections*, vols. 10, 11 — Springfield, 1915, 1916).

rush across the mountains, and traders in unprecedented numbers were to be found from Mackinac to the gulf of Mexico. In 1767, the Philadelphia firm of Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan employed about three hundred and fifty boatmen on the Ohio river for the transportation of their merchandise to the Illinois country.⁷ These advance agents of the British westward movement added fuel to the fire of speculation by their glowing descriptions of the new land.

The vacillating attitude of the successive British ministries tended still more to excite the desires and imagination of the promoters. It was well known both in America and Great Britain that the most influential politicians of the various factions which made contemporary British politics chaotic were in favor of some method of developing the west. Even the king himself could be counted among the expansionists. It was, therefore, expected that there would soon be removed the temporary prohibition of settlement west of the mountains, published in the famous proclamation of 1763 for the purpose of quieting the fears of the Indians.⁸ In order to be prepared for the mad westward rush that was sure to come as soon as this should be done, the various companies which had been formed for the exploitation of the territory maintained agents in the British capital to win the favor of the ministers. There were at one time in London agents representing the old Ohio company, formed by Virginians in 1747; a group of merchants claiming an indemnity in land for losses suffered at the outbreak of Pontiac's conspiracy; Virginia soldiers claiming payment in western lands for their services in war; officers and soldiers of Connecticut petitioning for land in a colony to be situated on the Mississippi; a company of officers who served in Pontiac's war who wished to found a colony at Detroit; a company of Philadelphia merchants and others, petitioning for the establishment of a colony in the Illinois country; and the great Mississippi company, composed of the most prominent Virginians, asking for an extensive grant on the Mississippi. In addition there are evidences of other

⁷ Alvord and Carter, *New régime*, 384.

⁸ Alvord, "Genesis of the proclamation of 1763," in *Michigan historical collections*, 36: 7-39, and "The British ministry and the treaty of Fort Stanwix," in *State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Proceedings* for 1908 (Madison, 1909), 165-183.

schemes which have not left such clear traces of their purposes.

It is very probable that the multiplicity of plans with their conflicting claims made it difficult for the ministers, open to varying influences, to reach a decision in regard to the best method of opening the west; but in the spring of 1768, a plan for imperial expansion was accepted by the Grafton ministry, and the imperial agents, particularly General Gage and the two superintendents of Indian affairs, were instructed to put it into execution. The underlying principle on which the instructions were based was that expansion westward was to be gradual and under the control of the imperial agents, who were to purchase the Indians' hunting grounds for settlement as rapidly as the growth of population in the colonies demanded. In order to carry this policy out, the ministers ordered that a boundary line between the settlements and the Indian territory should be agreed upon by treaty with the Indian tribes. Across the boundary thus run no white settler was to be allowed to pass until by treaty the line was pushed farther westward. In this way western expansion could be controlled and the rights of the Indians protected. Such a boundary line was completed within two years after the orders were sent out from London. Beginning at Lake Ontario, it bent westward so that it opened up for settlement the upper waters of the Ohio river as far west as the mouth of the Great Kanawha; thence it turned south and east, closing for settlement the back country of the southern colonies; then turning around the Florida peninsula it bent again westward till it reached the Mississippi.⁹

This boundary made available for settlement new territory within the colonies of New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. The land opened in the royal colony of Virginia was regarded as imperial domain by the majority of British ministers since it had been purchased by imperial money; consequently its disposition was under the control of the home government. An opportunity to form a new colony west of the mountains was therefore offered. There were capitalists ready to relieve the treasury of

⁹ Max Farrand, "The Indian boundary line," in *American historical review*, 10: no. 4; Alvord, "The British ministry and the treaty of Fort Stanwix," in State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Proceedings* for 1908, pp. 165-183.

all the expense involved in such an enterprise. Under the careful management of a Philadelphian, Samuel Wharton, there was formed a company composed of some of the most prominent public men both in America and Great Britain, such as Benjamin and Sir William Franklin, Thomas Walpole, Thomas Pownall, Lord Hertford, George Grenville, and many others, among whom were the most influential under-secretaries of state and of the treasury. The political connection was strengthened by taking into the company two members of the ministry, the Earl of Rochford and Lord Gower, who were able to win the support of the king himself. In this way the project of the new colony of Vandalia was forwarded, and all the preliminary steps had already been taken to launch the project when the revolutionary war broke out. One fact is of great significance: the new colony would have shut off Virginia completely from the west, for its boundaries as finally agreed upon stretched from North Carolina to Pennsylvania.

While the ministers had the subject of this newly purchased land under consideration, they came to a momentous conclusion concerning another part of the western territory, namely the old northwest. This was the most productive fur region contiguous to the settled parts of the country; and from the first the influence of the fur traders had been thrown against every project to form new settlements within its boundaries. The fur industry of Canada had passed rapidly into the hands of the Scotch, who exercised a very strong influence in favor of maintaining the great lakes region in its primitive condition. They were able to advance many strong arguments in support of their own interests, the most convincing being based on the necessity of protecting the hunting grounds of the Indians from the cupidity of speculators and frontiersmen. In 1774 the ministry determined to take action; and by the Quebec act parliament added all the territory between the lakes and the Ohio and Mississippi to the province of Quebec, thus removing the possibility of its exploitation by Virginia and other colonies.¹⁰ By this action the ministry closed for immediate settlement the land to the north of the Ohio and left for possible colonization only the southwest.

¹⁰ Victor Coffin, *The province of Quebec and the early American revolution* (University of Wisconsin Bulletin — Madison, 1896).

By these three decisions of the ministry, the running of the Indian boundary, the plan to establish the colony of Vandalia, and the union of the old northwest to the province of Quebec, the interests of Virginia were directly injured. Land speculation in the west had been for years the most important interest of Virginia's public men and it is not strange, therefore, that this imperial encroachment upon Virginia's charter rights, this curtailment of the ambition of her citizens, drove the latter almost unanimously into the party of the American revolutionists. To them the very existence of their colony seemed to be at stake. The conditions existing in the year 1774 predestined the course of the future war in the west.

Before the appeal to arms came, Virginia tried to defeat the ministerial plans by indirect methods. When John Stuart, southern superintendent of Indian affairs, first mentioned his intended purpose of running the Indian boundary line the colony of Virginia refused to listen to the proposal; and it was only when blunt directions from the ministry were received that the colony yielded; and even then means were found to thwart, in part, the ministerial intentions. It was Virginia's influence that caused Sir William Johnson, northern superintendent of Indian affairs, to permit the Iroquois to cede all their claims to lands south of the Ohio as far west as the Tennessee river. This extinguished the most important Indian claim to Kentucky and partially opened for settlement lands west of the Virginia Indian boundary which began at the Great Kanahwa. But the Virginians had other successes. In running the Indian boundary line back of their colony from North Carolina to the Ohio, they managed to persuade the Cherokee Indians to grant them a larger extent of territory on their western frontier.¹¹ By this change lands belonging to such men as George Washington, Patrick Henry, Colonel Lewis, and Thomas Walker were opened to immediate settlement.

The plan to found the colony of Vandalia was decidedly a

¹¹ This does not refer to the extension of the boundary line to the Kentucky river but only to the westward extension of the North Carolina boundary and from there to the Big Sandy. The later identification of the Big Sandy, i. e., "Louisa river," with the Kentucky river was due to the influences other than those of the Virginians. A full discussion of this will be found in Alvord, *Mississippi valley in British politics*.

more serious danger to Virginia's interests than the temporary expedient of the boundary line, and naturally aroused the greatest fear in the hearts of the colonists. It is possible that the open opposition to the new colony shown by Lord Hillsborough, the British colonial secretary at the time,—an opposition which cost him his office,—may have been due to his advocacy of the cause of the Virginians; at any rate his appointee to the governorship, Lord Dunmore, became the strongest champion of Virginia's claims to the west. Immediately on his arrival, in 1771, Dunmore allied himself with the western speculators and gave little heed to the instructions of a new colonial secretary, Lord Dartmouth. The policy of Lord Dunmore was dictated by his own financial interest, for he wished to become a great landholder, possibly a proprietor of a western colony. He immediately began making grants of land not only within the limits of the proposed new colony of Vandalia but even on the other side of the Indian boundary line as far west as the site of modern Louisville. He joined a company of Virginians which purchased from the Indians two large tracts of land in the Illinois country and had the audacity to recommend the company's enterprise to his superiors in England, being careful, however, not to disclose his own connection with it.¹²

This particular scheme seems to have been only a first step in the larger plans of the governor. He realized that Virginia's right to the old northwest would be made stronger if a colonial army were to march into that territory and subdue the Indian tribes. While the ministry in England, by means of the Quebec act, were closing the land north of the Ohio to possible settlement, Lord Dunmore, through his agents, stirred up an Indian war in that region; and, after parliament had extended the province of Quebec to the Ohio, Lord Dunmore led his colonial militia into the region and administered a severe chastisement to the Indians. Exactly what the governor planned may never be known, for, on his return from the war, the series of events which ultimately led to the revolutionary war was well under

¹² Dunmore's name is directly connected only with the Wabash land company but the promoters of this company were the same as those back of the Illinois land company and Lord Dunmore took both under his protection. See Alvord, *Illinois-Wabash land company manuscripts* (privately printed by Cyrus H. McCormick, Chicago, 1915).

way and Dunmore was obliged to give his attention to matters nearer home.

In spite of the acts of Virginia's governor and prominent citizens, the British government would undoubtedly have been able to carry out its plans and to have shut off Virginia completely from the territory west of the mountains, had not the revolutionary war broken out at the critical time and thus given Virginia the opportunity to strengthen her claims to the west by actual occupation.

The success of Dunmore's war in 1774 had for the time intimidated the Indians on the frontier, and there was a rush of settlers into the Ohio valley in spite of the fact that the prohibition of settlement by the British government was still in force, for, as has been seen, the colony of Vandalia was not yet established. During 1775 and the years following, this illegal settlement was pushed well down the Ohio and into the heart of Kentucky. The majority of these settlers, who came into the new country after the Indian war, were Virginian citizens and preferred, for the present at least, to retain their connection with the mother colony. Such settlements as Harrodsburg, Boiling Spring, and St. Asaph were formed and the new inhabitants voluntarily looked to Virginia for the protection of their rights. Virginia's sovereignty was thus stretched over the west by the initiative of her own citizens.

Just at the moment when Virginia through her frontiersmen seemed to be getting the better of the mother country in the dispute over the possession of the west, her sovereignty was threatened by another claimant. In the years just before the outbreak of the revolutionary war, there was handed around among the land speculators an opinion of two famous British jurists, Lord Camden and Lord Chancellor Yorke, to the effect that the Indian nations were sovereign powers and could, therefore, grant titles to lands which the British courts would be obliged to sustain. This opinion gave rise to great activity among the westerners and on the strength of it land purchases were made in the Illinois country, on the Wabash river, and elsewhere. Acting on this opinion a company of North Carolinians, with Colonel Richard Henderson at their head, purchased of the Cherokee the land south of the Ohio and west of the Indian boundary, which

had been ceded to Great Britain by the Six Nations at the treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1768. Within these boundaries, which included most of Kentucky and some of Tennessee, the proprietors proposed to establish the colony of Transylvania, and settlers were immediately sent into the region. In order to assure their purchase the proprietors sent a representative to the continental congress, where they were certain of finding sympathizers among the delegates of those colonies whose western boundaries were definitely fixed by their charters.

The Virginian authorities naturally took action to thwart the purposes of the North Carolinian proprietors. Lord Dunmore, although in the midst of the revolutionary struggle and deserted by many who had shared his western interests, issued a proclamation directed against this usurpation of the rights of the Virginia colony. The Virginia delegates to the continental congress were able to prevent that body at the critical moment from taking action against their interests. Still more important, however, was the action of the adherents of Virginia in Kentucky. The settlers in that region were incensed at the assertion by the North Carolina proprietors of claims over lands which they had taken up in accordance with Virginia law; and they found in a young frontiersman, George Rogers Clark, a leader who was to win fame for himself as the most effective promoter of the claims of his mother state.

Clark was at this time a young man in his early twenties, but he possessed those qualities of courage and determination that fitted him preëminently for the leadership of a rough pioneer community. He had already identified himself with Virginia's interests in Dunmore's war, in which he had fought under General Lewis. He had gone to Kentucky to advance himself by land speculation and was naturally enough opposed to the North Carolinian usurpers; it was the decisive action of this young Virginian that ultimately thwarted the plans of the latter. The smouldering discontent against Henderson was blown to a flame, and an assembly of Virginians chose Clark as one of the two representatives commissioned to go to the mother province to lay their complaints before the assembly.¹³ Clark met with ready

¹³ James A. James, *George Rogers Clark papers (Illinois historical collections, vol. 8 — Springfield, 1912)*, p. liv.

sympathy for his plans from Patrick Henry, who had been one of the close advisers of Lord Dunmore in his opposition to the British ministerial plans. It was not difficult, therefore, to arouse him to the necessity of taking such action as would secure the claims of Virginia against usurpation. The county of Kentucky was formed, and the mantle of Virginia sovereignty was thus thrown over the land south of the Ohio extending to the Mississippi. It was, therefore, the action of the pioneers acting under their rights of popular sovereignty that saved Virginia's claims.

In the old northwest, however, the British power seemed firmly established. In accordance with the purpose of the Quebec act, the administration of Canada was extended into this region, lieutenant-governors being appointed for Detroit, Mackinac, Vincennes, and Illinois, although on account of the course of events no permanent government was established at the two last named places. After the appointment of these British officers, the border warfare was better organized and Indian parties were sent in every direction to distress the American pioneer settlements. In spite of the efforts by the Americans to retain the Indians in their service, the aborigines naturally enough preferred to wield the tomahawk against those who were actually invading their hunting grounds. Their fight had always been against the pioneer settler, and in the contest between the mother country and the colonies, the Indians saw their opportunity to stay the westward advance of the white man.

The united colonists realized keenly the importance of conciliating the Indians and of driving the British from their stronghold on the lakes; and accordingly congress appointed commissioners and agents for the Indians. The officials who had charge of the old northwest were stationed at Pittsburg; and their executive agent was Colonel George Morgan, who as representative of the Philadelphia trading firm of Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan had had ample opportunity to familiarize himself with the western territory and to make connections with the Indians. He was particularly well acquainted with the conditions in the Illinois country, where during his sojourn of many years he had made many warm friends.¹⁴ During the years

¹⁴ James, *George Rogers Clark papers*, p. xxix.

1776 to 1778 Morgan was constantly planning the conquest of the territory under his charge. His correspondents at Detroit and Kaskaskia informed him that the Americans would find no difficulty in winning the French inhabitants to throw in their lot with the American colonies. He, in turn, encouraged them to hope that an American army would soon occupy all the great lakes and Mississippi region. As a matter of fact the continental congress was willing to send out an expedition, but the necessary funds for such a far reaching undertaking were not to be found.

Virginia's opportunity, therefore, came to her through the financial embarrassment of the confederacy. Her interests on account of her charter claims were much more definite than those of the united colonies; her citizens had for years been reaching out into the west in the hope of making fortunes both through the fur trade and by land speculation. Many Virginians were looking to the region across the Ohio river as to a land of promise for their future enterprises, and some even had a direct stake in the territory through their association with the Wabash land company. Furthermore, the Virginia settlements in Kentucky were directly threatened by the British troops and the Indians. On the other hand, they occupied an extremely good strategic position from which to make an offensive movement against the poorly defended British posts north of the Ohio; and the continuous attack of the Indians on their homes in the blue grass region furnished these settlers with an incentive to decisive action.

Were the region of Illinois as unknown and seemingly remote as it has been frequently pictured by historians, the suggestion of an invasion of the country would probably not have been favorably received by even the boldest of the men of the Virginia frontier. But the truth is that the Illinois country had become a fairly well known region since 1765. Hundreds of traders from Pennsylvania and Virginia had visited the quaint villages of Kaskaskia and Cahokia to traffic with the French inhabitants, and this intercourse was continued up to the time of the famous expedition of George Rogers Clark. Not only did the English colonists visit the Illinois villages, the Frenchmen in turn were frequent visitors to the Ohio river and some of them were seen

within the new settlements of Kentucky and even as far east as Philadelphia. By this commercial intercourse attachments had been formed in the French villages of the Mississippi which generated sufficient magnetic force to attract across the Ohio representatives of the revolutionary party in the colonies. In the year 1777 there were in Kaskaskia and Cahokia several members of the American trading class who had retained their commercial connections with the east and were even closely affiliated with men who had cast their lot with the revolting colonies. These distant representatives of Americanism took every occasion to discuss with their French neighbors the struggle for liberty and were so successful as evangelists of the novel ideas that a large party of American sympathizers was developed among the French population;¹⁵ among its members were to be found most of the officers of the militia, who were destined to exercise a potent influence when the crisis arose.

There are, however, indications of a much closer relation between the Virginia expedition and the Illinois inhabitants than the growth of an American party in the Illinois country. For many years there had lived at Kaskaskia as trader and land speculator William Murray of Philadelphia. He was the moving spirit in the formation of both the Illinois and the Wabash land companies, and his future was bound up in the development of the purchases of these companies. It was William Murray who had persuaded Lord Dunmore of Virginia and some of the latter's associates to make investments in this region. With the outbreak of the revolution Murray seems to have felt a still greater dependence upon Virginia where he had many supporters. In 1776 he was in New Orleans when Captain George Gibson and William Linn came thither to purchase munitions from the Spaniards for the colonies. It is not evident how far Murray entered into relations with Gibson, but it seems most probable that a letter to his brother advising him to assist an American military expedition on its arrival in Kaskaskia was carried by Gibson's boats on their return voyage in 1777. Certainly Murray was well informed of Virginia's activities in the west, for he appeared at Williamsburg to urge the claims of his land

¹⁵ Alvord, *Kaskaskia records (Illinois historical collections, vol. 5 — Springfield, 1909)*, p. 18 ff.

companies as soon as the news reached that city of George Rogers Clark's success.

Another Kaskaskian who had commercial interests in the success or failure of Virginia's enterprise was Thomas Bentley. He had been in the Illinois country only a few years but had cemented his relations with the French population of Kaskaskia by marrying a daughter of one of the most prominent families of that village. His trading enterprises carried his boats up and down the Mississippi and on the Ohio. There is indubitable evidence that one of his boats met Gibson's expedition at the mouth of the Ohio in March, 1777, when Bentley received certain information of events that were still in the future. He must have been informed at this time that spies were to be sent from Kentucky to investigate conditions at Kaskaskia. From the interest George Rogers Clark showed in Bentley in later years it must be that at this time some communication passed between the two men. The British commander of the Illinois country, Philippe de Rocheblave, declared later that Bentley was chiefly responsible for the coming of the Americans to the Mississippi.¹⁶

One other factor in the western situation needs to be noted. In spite of the reluctance of the Spanish government to enter into a treaty of alliance with the Americans, the representatives of that monarchy in America were distinctly friendly to the cause of the revolting colonies. It has already been seen that Americans were permitted to purchase munitions of war in North America; but it is not so well known that the agent of the Spanish government in America, Don Juan de Miralles, was confidentially informed of the campaign planned by George Rogers Clark and regarded himself and Patrick Henry as co-partners in sending the expedition against Kaskaskia. This prior understanding between the Virginia government and the Spanish explains the friendly reception of the colony's military leader at St. Louis.¹⁷

The main events of Clark's expedition: how he sent spies to Kaskaskia, and induced Patrick Henry to furnish supplies; how he collected a company of about two hundred pioneers with

¹⁶ On subject of Murray and Bentley, see Alvord, *Kaskaskia records*, pp. xvi, et seq.

¹⁷ Gerard to Vergennes, July 25, 1778, in Doniol, *Histoire de la participation de la France à l'établissement des Etats-Unis d'Amérique* (Paris, 1885-1892), 3: 293.

whom he descended the Ohio, marched across the prairies of Illinois and on the night of July 4-5, 1778, took Kaskaskia, have already been sketched. Clark's own narrative needs correction in one important detail. It pictures the occupation of Kaskaskia as a complete surprise and as causing a fear among the inhabitants, scarcely to be understood in view of the fact that the latter had been bred among the dangers of the frontier and that there had been frequent intercourse between the French and Americans for many years. When it is further known that the French had been warned of the approach of the Virginians several days before their arrival and had refused to prepare for the defense in spite of the urgent entreaties of their acting commandant, Clark's classic description of the poltroonery of the French must be very much discounted indeed. The American sympathizers in the Illinois villages had done their work so well that almost all the French officers of militia had been won over, and their commandant was left helpless to defend the territory entrusted to his care. After the refusal of his own soldiers to serve him, the latter sent post haste to Vincennes for support; forty men were sent out from there but they arrived too late to prevent the Virginians' success. The countrymen of Kaskaskia and Cahokia were already throwing up their hats in joy at the sound of the words of independence and the French alliance. There had been no need of a conquest by arms; there had only been an occupation by friends. Clark's task had, indeed, proved an easy one.

The maintenance of the possession of this territory by the Virginians was a much more difficult and dangerous problem. The people of Vincennes, on the Wabash river, were persuaded by Dr. Jean Baptiste Laffont and Father Gibault to throw in their lot with their relatives and friends and change their allegiance; they were allowed to be American citizens only for a short time, however, for in the fall British forces under Lieutenant-Governor Hamilton of Detroit occupied the village.

With a formidable force of the enemy within striking distance, the position of the Virginians in Illinois was now seen to be untenable unless some desperate measures should be taken. Half of Clark's troops had already returned to Kentucky, leaving him with less than a hundred American followers. To increase his

embarrassments, he was without resources. The French people of the Illinois villages saved him from danger; two companies of militia were raised among them, and the necessary money and supplies were willingly furnished in return for drafts on Virginia. With this support Clark was able to make one of the most dramatic military campaigns of the war. Fighting his way through the frozen marshes of the prairies, he led his men to Vincennes and captured the place easily, since Major Hamilton, regarding an attack by Clark as impossible, had diminished the garrison. Thus with Vincennes in his control, Clark's position at Kaskaskia and Cahokia was rendered fairly secure.

The summer of 1779 marked the zenith of Virginia's power north of the Ohio; from that date there was a steady decline. In 1780, the British made an attack on St. Louis and the Illinois villages; although it was repulsed by the combined efforts of the Spaniards and Clark, the affair demonstrated so significantly the returning energy of the British that Clark felt it dangerous to maintain the posts north of the Ohio any longer. Accordingly the garrisons at Vincennes and Kaskaskia were withdrawn. For a year more there were a score of soldiers in those posts, acting as scouts; but even these were recalled in the following winter, and the villages were left to shift for themselves. In spite of this withdrawal, it was acknowledged by the Spanish governor of St. Louis that the region which had been actually occupied by the Virginians in 1778 belonged to the revolted colonies. In extent this territory was, however, only a small part of the old northwest, for it comprised merely the region bounded by the Illinois river as far as Peoria, by a line from that village to Vincennes, and thence by the Wabash river to the Ohio, in other words, approximately the southern half of what is now the state of Illinois. Outside of these boundaries lay the British territory governed by officers with headquarters at Mackinac, Detroit, and Niagara; and over the whole extent of this region, almost within sight of the American troops at Pittsburgh, roamed the Indian allies of Great Britain. Virginia had really only weakened the hold of the mother country on a small corner of the disputed territory; and neither the establishment of a few scouts at Peoria by the Spaniards nor their seizure of St. Joseph,—

now in lower Michigan,—in January, 1781, brought the question of dominion into dispute in any way.

There exists some doubt as to whether or not this very slight occupation of the old northwest by the Virginians influenced the final disposition of territory in the treaty which closed the war. Most western writers, anxious to magnify the importance of their own region, have been inclined to give Clark the credit of securing for the United States this important acquisition; the easterners have had too little information on the subject to express an authoritative opinion, but many have allowed their skepticism to become evident. The following statement is a typical expression of the western view: "Few events have had a vaster influence upon the future of the nation than this expedition of Clark's. Not only did he secure the western gate of the republic, but he gained these western lands the ownership of which greatly advanced the idea of union."¹⁸ If such a view is correct, Clark's expedition must be looked upon as one of the most important episodes of the revolutionary war and should be classed with the campaigns that ended in the surrender of Burgoyne and of Cornwallis; in such a case, Virginia's service to the United States, when she sent forth her men to protect her frontiers and to make effective her western claims, can scarcely be measured. The question, then, of the influence of the occupation of the Illinois villages upon the negotiations of the peace is of real importance in any attempt to interpret the final treaty.

It is possible that the American commissioners may have felt that their position in claiming the west for the new republic was somewhat strengthened by the knowledge of the success of Clark, but it is unbelievable that they would have demanded less, even had he failed, since the first boundaries proposed by Benjamin Franklin included all Canada as well as the west; and his argument in support of his proposal was that such generosity would win the affection of the Americans and separate them from France. Furthermore, he pointed out that the long extended frontiers between Canada and the United States were occupied by "the most disorderly of the people, who being far removed from the eye and control of their respective governments, are

¹⁸ Van Tyne, *American revolution*, p. 284.

the most bold in committing offences against neighbors, and are forever occasioning complaints, and furnishing matter for fresh differences between their states.”¹⁹ Although the demand for the cession of Canada was not persisted in, still the demand of the American commissioners was for the cession of a large extent of western territory, most of which was occupied by British troops, and which could not be claimed from the fact that in one corner of the region there were a few French villages, who, though without American garrisons, acknowledged the sovereignty of the thirteen colonies.

The interest of France and Spain were not in accord with this extensive demand of the United States; in fact the interests of Spain were directly opposed to any extension of the United States's boundaries in the west, since her possessions on the right bank of the Mississippi river in such an event would always be endangered by the restless and lawless frontier population. Spain's principal interest, however, was to preserve the navigation of the Mississippi for herself; and her statesmen thought the best means to accomplish this end was to secure for her a narrow strip of territory along the eastern bank, extending from the gulf to the Ohio river. Beyond this, her ambition did not extend; but in order to limit still further the expansion of the Americans, Spain proposed that England should retain at the treaty of peace all territory lying between the Ohio and the Mississippi rivers which had been united to Canada by the Quebec act of 1774.²⁰

French diplomacy during the American revolution has been a subject of dispute among historians. One school of interpreters, following the unreasoning suspicions of Jay and Adams, has insisted that the French minister Vergennes was guilty of playing a double game and used his influence to restrict the new nation on its western boundaries. The interpretation of the opponents of this school, who have listened to the more temperate language of Benjamin Franklin, is now known to be better established, for a careful examination of the most secret dispatches of Vergennes proves that he was most friendly to the revolting colonies and

¹⁹ Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, *Life of William, earl of Shelburne, with extracts from his papers and correspondence* (London, 1875-1876), 2: 122.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2: 115.

promoted their interests as far as it was in his power. Naturally enough, however, his attitude toward the extension of the boundaries of the United States to the west was limited by his many obligations to Spain, which country had been induced to enter the war only after a definite promise from the French minister of an addition to her territories. From the first, Spain had insisted on the sole right of navigation of the Mississippi river, and Vergennes' tentative consideration of Spain's plan for the peace, outlined above, can only be explained by his desire to secure peace, a desire which might be thwarted by the conflicting interests in the west of the allies of France.²¹

The machinations of Spain were of little moment in the final treaty, for Great Britain had determined, in spite of the ease with which she might have secured more favorable boundaries in the west, to yield to the demands of her revolted colonies in this particular. This compliance is the adequate explanation of the treaty; and the reason for it is to be found in the attitude of Lord Shelburne, who was prime minister at the time of the final settlement. Twice before, Lord Shelburne had been intimately associated with the affairs of western America. When he was president of the board of trade in 1763, he had drafted the proclamation of 1763, which was the fundamental law of the west in the years preceding the revolutionary war; and from 1766 to January, 1768, he was the secretary of state in whose department the care of colonial affairs fell. During this period the chief American interest in his eyes had been the rapid settlement of the west. In September, 1767, he laid before the ministry a comprehensive plan for the development of the region, in which he set forth the desirability of establishing colonies along the Mississippi river, wherein the following argument is of significance: "It is impracticable to prevent along such a Frontier, the taking Possession of unoccupied Land and resisting a general Inclination of Settlement."²² The whole paper revealed Shelburne's belief in the inevitable movement of the Americans westward until the whole territory should be occupied. During the negotiations of 1782 he gave expression to the same thought

²¹ Paul C. Phillips, *The west in the diplomacy of the American revolution* (University of Illinois, *Bulletin*, vol. 11, no. 7 — Urbana, 1913), ch. 11.

²² Lansdowne manuscripts.

in a letter to his agent in Paris in the following words: "For the good of America, whatever the Government may be, new provinces must be erected on those back lands and down the Mississippi."²³

To a man holding such a view of the future of the west, whose principles had been completely liberalized by the free trade teachings of Adam Smith, Franklin's argument that a stable peace could only be made by ceding sufficient territory in the west for the expansion of the restless frontier population was convincing; and there seems never to have entered Lord Shelburne's mind a doubt as to the expediency of granting such extensive boundaries, even though the territory was garrisoned by British troops. He granted what seemed to him necessary for the completion of a permanent peace. The basis then for the success of American diplomacy had been laid not by the victory of the arms of Virginia, not through the boldness of George Rogers Clark in winning the old northwest for the United States, but in the liberal principles held by a British statesman. There is certainly a note of justifiable pride for his act, the noblest of his life, in the following words penned by Lord Shelburne to an American friend in 1797: "I cannot express to you the satisfaction I have felt in seeing the forts (of the northwest) given up, I may tell you in confidence what may astonish you, as it did me, that up to the very last debate in the House of Lords, the Ministry did not appear to comprehend the policy upon which the boundary line was drawn, and persist in still considering it as a measure of necessity not of choice. However it is indifferent who understands it. The deed is done: and a strong foundation laid for eternal amity between England and America."²⁴

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²³ Fitzmaurice, *Life of William, earl of Shelburne*, 2: 194.

²⁴ Fitzmaurice, *Life of William, earl of Shelburne*, 2: 202, note.